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Editorial

Less Than Meets the Eye

President Bush recently discussed the idea of expanding a tax credit for drivers who buy hybrid cars. At first glance, the notion seems like a winner and generally consistent with Mr. Bush's newfound enthusiasm for alternative fuels and technologies. But on closer inspection, the idea looks like a self-serving political ploy — a quick fix to give the appearance of progress while obscuring serious contradictions in Mr. Bush's approach to oil independence.

The tax credit currently on the books offsets some of the extra cost of hybrid cars, but it is fully available only for the first 60,000 that a manufacturer sells. After that, the amount of the credit dwindles, eventually to zero. If Mr. Bush removed that 60,000-car cap it would presumably lead to the manufacture and sale of more hybrids than would otherwise be the case. That's fine. The problem is that more hybrids are unlikely to reduce overall oil consumption, unless there is a concurrent increase in fuel economy standards. Today's standard for cars — 27.5 miles per gallon— is a fleetwide average. So if carmakers sold more high-mileage hybrids, they could also sell ever-bigger gas guzzlers and still meet the target.

Mr. Bush is a happy man when he is doling out tax breaks. But he is clearly uncomfortable with imposing higher fuel economy standards on automakers.

His often-repeated claim that he awaits Congressional permission to raise the standard is a delaying tactic, and especially cynical for a president who has run roughshod over Congressional authority. Ditto his claim that it will take further study to determine a fair and practical new standard. The 27.5-m.p.g. benchmark is the same now as it was in 1985. In the more than two decades since then, there has been ample study and debate on achievable improvements to what is by now a pathetically low standard. What has been missing all those years, and is missing now, is the political leadership to make those improvements.

Without higher standards, more tax credits for hybrids are all carrot and no stick. That's pandering, and that's just what American drivers do not need.